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Improving veterinary care for organic livestock producers

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Improving veterinary care for organic livestock producers

Abstract

Organic producers and Iowa veterinarians were questioned about the existing veterinary systems and care available to organic livestock producers.

Keywords

Sociology, Niche meat dairy and poultry, Organic production practices and comparisons

Disciplines

Entrepreneurial and Small Business Operations | Rural Sociology | Veterinary Preventive Medicine, Epidemiology, and Public Health

Improving veterinary care for organic livestock systems

Abstract: Organic producers and Iowa veterinarians were questioned about the existing veterinary systems and care available to organic livestock producers.

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Co-investigator:
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Viroqua, WI

Budget:
\$9,342 for year one

QHow well does the current system of veterinary care fit the needs of organic livestock producers in Iowa, and how might the fit be improved?

AThe answers to those questions varied from one stakeholder group to the next. Most producers were satisfied with the availability of veterinary services and reported a large degree of independence in dealing with herd health challenges. In contrast, the veterinarians pointed out a variety of health concerns possible on organic farms and stressed the importance of veterinary involvement in those systems. They also indicated overwhelmingly that suitable information was either unavailable or difficult to access.



MARKETING

Background

The project was intended to assess the framework of education and information delivery related to veterinary care for organic livestock in Iowa. The investigators collected data that accurately represented the needs and experiences of Iowa's organic livestock producers and Iowa's production animal veterinarians. The objectives were to:

- determine whether those involved with organic livestock production (on both sides) had access to the information necessary to deal successfully with challenges to livestock health, and
- provide suggestions for improvement based on the experiences of major stakeholders.

Approach and methods

The project had three main elements. The first two elements were survey mailings to organic livestock producers and to food animal production veterinarians in Iowa. The third segment was a panel discussion including experts with ties to organic livestock production, veterinary education and animal health. The panel members evaluated the information gathered in the surveys and presented their thoughts on the survey responses as well as ideas for further examination.

The farmer survey population was identified from a list of USDA Certified Organic livestock producers obtained from the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service office. Ninety producers responded, but 15 were not raising USDA certified organic livestock and were excluded from the analysis. The responses from 75 remaining producer surveys comprised the data set for this analysis. The ending response rate was 55.6 percent.

A survey was mailed to all practicing food animal production veterinarians in Iowa, using a list provided by the Iowa Veterinary Medical Association, which sanctioned



Jersey calf at Kilgus Dairy, where milk is produced on grass, all-natural, without added rBST.

the survey and encouraged member participation. Three hundred thirty-seven veterinarians responded to the survey for a total response rate of 69.2 percent. Forty-one veterinarians indicated they did not currently provide services to producers raising food animals and were excluded from the analysis.

Conclusions

Three major findings were discussed by the panel in 2010.

1. Iowa organic producers are satisfied with the veterinary services available to them. They prefer to handle most routine health treatment without consulting outside help and report lack of herd health challenges as the primary reason for this preference.
2. In contrast to producer perceptions, veterinarians point to a variety of health challenges on organic farms and stress the need for veterinary involvement in these systems.
3. Veterinarians expressed confusion about how to best serve organic producers and where to acquire reliable information. The panel agreed that increased availability of information would benefit organic livestock production in general, despite the level of producer satisfaction demonstrated by the survey results.

Despite the confidence expressed by the producers, the veterinarians surveyed saw weaknesses in management and herd health care protocol in organic systems and noted that producers should seek veterinary care advice more frequently than they do. Several expressed concerns regarding animal welfare as well. Most said veterinary professionals should be active in the development of organic agriculture through traditional on-farm involvement, stressing the importance of preventive management. Others said veterinarians should be involved in inspection and oversight, or in the development of organic standards. Veterinarians were consulted during the organic rule-making process from 1990 to 2001, but no veterinarians surveyed indicated participation in that process.

While most veterinarians expressed some reservations about organic production, the majority did indicate some level of interest. They thought the needed information is difficult to access and favor continuing education options. A smaller but still significant subset of veterinarians favor injecting organic agriculture education into veterinary medicine programs, and several expressed the need for formal research on alternative treatment options. The open-ended comments showed a high degree of veterinarian misunderstanding regarding the definition and rules of organic production, existence of national standards, and information access.

Impact of results

The results have sparked a discussion that is helping to lay the groundwork for further exploration in this area. Communication among different stakeholder groups has been initiated and documentation is available that previously had not been collected in Iowa. These data have been presented to the Iowa Veterinary Medical Association and provide an important argument in favor of increased education options within the



Guy Jodarski D.V.M. discusses organic agriculture and animal health at a variety of conferences and events, including an annual veterinary workshop hosted by Organic Valley. (Photo courtesy of David Bane D.V.M.)

university veterinary medical school and through continuing education. This could result in greater levels of veterinary involvement in organic systems, which could in turn result in improved herd health for these producers. Hopefully, it has raised awareness among veterinarians, who have now been exposed to some discussion of the topic.

Education and outreach

One publication was generated by the project—"Views of Veterinarians and Producers on Organic Livestock Production Systems." Iowa State University Extension, 2011, forthcoming. The project was discussed by Jim West, DVM, at the Iowa Veterinary Medicine annual meeting. West is a member of the ISU College of Veterinary Medicine faculty and was part of the project research committee. Investigators reported on the project at the Iowa Organic Conference and the Midsummer Veterinary Conference for Sustainable Agriculture. Kurt VanHulzen, DVM, offered information at the project at the February 2011 meeting of the Iowa Veterinary Medical Association.

Leveraged funds

No additional funds were leveraged by this project.

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